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ABSTRACT

During the last decade, the impact of social sciences on educational theory and practice, and anthropology, in particular, have changed the way in which educators view classrooms, teachers, students, and learning itself. Classrooms are subcultures that require particular behaviors, linguistic patterns, and mind sets for members to succeed; teachers are ethnographers who write descriptions of student behaviors during classroom practices. This close attention to student activity and ability has shifted the focus to a "student-centered" curriculum. A graduate course was designed for teachers to work on their own writing through lessons learned from the recollections of well-known authors. Students read and discuss specific authors and their retrospectives on literacy, share experiences with the writing process in classrooms, and write stories from their own lives. Students learn that they must help children become constant readers, show them the benefits of writing and exploring life experiences about which to write, and promote authorship through book-making and journal writing. (Contains four references.) (CR)

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Past Into Present: Literacy Through Life Stories

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference, Charlotte, North Carolina, April 10-12, 1997

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Past Into Present: Literacy Through Life Stories

During the last decade, the impact of the social sciences on educational theory and practice has been revolutionary. Anthropology, in particular, has changed the way in which educators view classrooms, teachers, students, and learning itself.

We now see classrooms as subcultures that require particular behaviors, linguistic patterns, and mind sets for members to succeed. We now see teachers as ethnographers who write descriptions of student behaviors during classroom practices. Through their close attention to their students, or, in anthropological jargon, their informants, they popularize the catch-phrase "teachers as researchers". This close attention to student activity and ability has shifted the focus of the curriculum to what is now termed "student-centered".

But the classroom as a subculture with the teacher as a researcher of student centered curriculum provides no passive picture of the process of observation and documentation. Anthropologists are known as participant observers in the cultures they study. While they refrain from affecting the cultures in which they participate, they describe learning which is informal, prompted by exposure, modeling, and facilitation on the part of adults and observation, participation, and ownership on the part of the children. Thus, from their view of the learning process, educators now use such phrases as "teacher as facilitator" and "student ownership of learning" .

These shifted perspectives in education appear most prominently in the learning of literacy. We have accumulated a large body of teacher anecdotes about contemporary classroom life. However, with these anecdotes, we have also created a large body of unfinished life stories. We only know contemporary success stories. After the children's stories are written, we do not know what happens to the literacy learning of these children. We only know which practices have worked that day, that week, or that month. We know nothing of the long-term effects of the practices we are so busily documenting. To learn more, we might follow these children into the future with longitudinal studies focusing on their reading and writing. However, we may also look backwards at adults who were once children.

I would argue that we have a large body of descriptive data on the learning of literacy in the biographies and autobiographies of writers. Their lives are rich, full ethnographies. I would also argue that their stories are even more valid than the stories we are now collecting from children in our classrooms. The authors' lives are completed. We know where their literacy experiences went. For this one reason alone, their lives provide more accurate insights and better contexts for the process of literacy learning over time.

For this reason, I designed a graduate course for teachers to work on their own writing through the lessons on reading and writing learned from the recollections of well-known authors. While many authors were considered in my course, for this presentation I would particularly like to contrast the lives of Eudora Welty and James

Agee. I will also discuss what students experienced and produced, and, in their own words, share what they learned from exposure to retrospectives on literacy.

The students were assigned One Writer's Beginnings, the recollections of the Pulitzer Prize-winning author Eudora Welty about her childhood in Mississippi. Eudora experienced a nearly ideal literacy environment which would support her development as a writer. Her parents modeled reading. In particular, her mother was an avid reader. Eudora tells us that her mother "...read Dickens in the spirit in which she would have eloped with him" (Welty, 1991, p. 7). Moreover, when her mother was a girl, her mother's parents believed, as many did at the time, that long hair sapped a child's strength. They offered Eudora's mother gold earrings to let them cut her hair. She refused until they offered her a complete set of Charles Dickens shipped up the river in a barrel to their home. Eudora' s mother valued these books even as a married adult. When her own house was on fire, she climbed on crutches with a broken leg to the second floor, threw the volumes out the window to her husband, and only then jumped to safety herself. Eudora knew when she saw the set of Dickens that the books were waiting just for her.

In addition to modeling reading and saving her books for Eudora, Eudora's mother introduced her to reading by reading aloud to her. Eudora remembers:

> I learned that from the age of two or three that any room in our house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. My mother read to me. She'd read to me in the big bedroom in the mornings, when we were in the rocker together, which ticked in rhythm as we

> rocked, as though we had a cricket accompanying the story. She'd read to me in the diningroom on winter afternoons in front of the coal fire, with our cuckoo clock ending the story with 'Cuckoo', and at night when I'd got in my own bed. I must have given her no peace (Welty, 1991, p. 5).

Given such immersion in listening to stories from books and the easy availability of books, Eudora wanted to learn to read and practice reading herself. She begged her parents to teach her the alphabet, and her mother pressured the principal to take Eudora into the local grammar school when she was five years old. When Eudora was seven years old, she stayed out of school for nearly a year for what the doctor called, a "fast-beating heart". She credits this extended period of silent reading in bed with the discovery of her own author's voice. She writes:

> Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't HEAR. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story of the poem itself...My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that I hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make my changes. I have always trusted this voice (Welty, 1991, pp. 12-13).

The reader's voice aided Eudora's leap to her writer's voice and the profession she chose when she grew up. She wrote almost exclusively from life situations. She remains in her family's Mississippi home today and calls herself, "a writer who came of a sheltered life" (Welty, 1991, p. 114) who chose to live at home to do her writing in a familiar world and never regretted it (Prenshaw, 1984, p. 131).

James Agee's life was at the opposite extreme of the emotional spectrum. My students watch the PBS videotape of "Agee" which was nominated for an Academy Award. In this video, they learn about his life through his own writings read aloud and through interviews with friends. When Agee was a child in Tennessee, his father died in an auto accident en route to visit his grandfather who had a sudden heart attack. The subject of his father's death became the book A Death in the Family, often required in freshman English courses. His mother was extremely religious and the two of them spent long summers in religious retreats. He left Tennessee to go to prep school in the Northeast and later to Harvard. At Harvard he did a parody of Time magazine that so impressed Henry Luce he offered Agee a job after college. While living in New York, Agee wrote for Fortune and was offered the assignment of a story on white sharecroppers in Georgia. From this venture he wrote Now Let Us Praise Famous Men which won the Pulitzer Prize. When Agee returned to New York, John Huston, touched by Agee's insight in a review of one of his movies, invited Agee to join him in California to write the screenplay for the film "The African Queen". Throughout these adventures, the nomadic Agee lived on alcohol, cigarettes, and three hours sleep. He married three times, and produced lists of topics about which to

write. He never spent twenty-four hours without writing, yet he was never able to limit his topics to produce the amount of writing he wanted. His third wife observed that "Writing was like a master in his life. He couldn't get away from it." His own view describes an impossible perfection. He writes, "Nothing else holds me in the same way. It is a horrible definiteness, an unhealthy obsession. If I could make it what it ought to be made, I would not be human." He died of a heart attack in a New York City taxi at age 45.

My students contrast the pleasure, discipline, and scope in Welty's life to the lack of satisfaction, discipline, and scope in Agee's life. We talk about creative people, tortured artists, and what it means to become a writer. Eventually, because we are teachers, we talk about writing in classrooms. We share experiences with writing process and book-making and how so many child-authors already declare that they want to grow up to become writers. We wonder if we are justified in encouraging young children to write when their adult lives may be difficult as many of the writers' lives we are reading.

Eventually, after our reading and talking, we decide to make our own plunge into writing. Our class brainstorms life experiences about which we might write. I write suggestions on the board and then, as a example, choose one topic and tell a story from my own life. Next, a student chooses from our list of such topics as the vacation from hell, in-laws, my first day of teaching, children, ESP, death, etc. and we tell each other our stories. By the end of the class, the students have drafted one experience which they know they will eventually share with the class. I hand out folders in which I

keep their drafts. As the class ends, they write a working title on their piece if they have not done so. I collect the folders.

At the beginning of the next class, I write the steps for the class to follow on the board and pass out their folders. The students read their stories aloud to a partner. They only listen. They do not exchange written stories. The partner comments on the title, beginning, ending, and any places where understanding might be difficult. Next the students revise and rewrite based on the feedback from their listening audience. When the pieces are rewritten so anyone can read them, the students exchange their written pieces. I distribute editing sheets. We have dictionaries and grammars in class. When the students are satisfied after more rewrites, they form small groups to share their stories. The understanding of the class is that we are polite and receptive. Our goal is to make all the stories sharper.

The following week the class sits in a large circle. I bring tea and coffee and we have an authors' party. I have been writing a story as well. I had a writing buddy, I circulated among students from week to week, and I also am ready to share my story. The author's party is a poignant class, particularly in summer sessions when we meet every day. For example, we have laughed at the many funny ways to get engaged, and shared the extreme embarrassment of the bride who turned at the altar, stepped on her train, and ripped off the back of her wedding gown in front of an entire congregation of family and friends. We have gasped at the story of the camp pitched in thick fog at the edge of what turned out to be a dangerous ravine when the fog lifted. We have wondered about the dead aunt who helped her niece find the aunt's

bracelet for the niece to wear for a New Year's party. We have shared the passings of parents and grandparents, and learned the painful moment that one student had to strain over a hospital counter to read upside down a physician's diagnosis of her leukemia. As she shared the story of this experience with our class, she started to cry. Her neighboring classmate gently took her piece and finished reading it for her. When the story was finished, we all had tears in our eyes. The life stories that we shared had made us authors just as the life stories of the more famous had helped define them as authors and helped us define their authorship.

And so how did the authors' lives specifically help us? I ask the students this question on their final exam. Their observations fall into two categories: what they learned about writing and what they learned to help children write. First, about writing, they learn that writers are big-time readers, and that they start to read early in life. Writers often treasure their bond with a particular book. Their reading inspires them to write. They are motivated by either extremely positive or extremely negative life experiences. They soon take control of their literacy learning. They have an intense desire to write; they can not live without doing so; they must write every day.

Second, about children and writing, the students learn that to help children become writers, they must expose children to good books. They need to help children become constant readers. They can show them the benefits of writing, and explore life experiences about which to write. They may suggest ways to handle writer's block, and promote authorship through book-making or fluency with journal writing. They find the time in class to let children write every day. And, if any moment is left, they can

now share with the children their favorite stories from the lives of authors.

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